



Southeast Fishery Bulletin

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NOAA Fisheries Service Announces a Seasonal Closure for the Gulf of Mexico Recreational Grouper Fishery from February 15 to March 15

NOAA Fisheries Service published a final rule implementing a recreational closed season for black, gag, and red grouper on November 17, 2006 (71 FR 66878). The seasonal closure will be in effect from February 15 to March 15 beginning in 2007 and will occur annually.

NOAA Fisheries Service proposed this closure on March 31, 2006 (71 FR 16275). The seasonal closure includes important spawning seasons for black, gag, and red grouper and will coincide with the one-month commercial fishery grouper closure. Prohibiting harvest of all three species will reduce bycatch and prevent effort from shifting to gag and black grouper as a result of more restrictive recreational red grouper regulations.

NOAA Fisheries Service delayed implementation of the seasonal closure in response to concerns from the public and because a pertinent new gag stock assessment was pending. The latest stock assessment for gag, completed in August 2006, indicates gag is undergoing overfishing. In light of

this new information and considering the benefits of the seasonal closure discussed previously, NOAA Fisheries Service is now implementing the recreational closed season for red, gag, and black grouper.

The seasonal closure, in combination with grouper bag limit provisions implemented earlier this year on June 15, 2006 (71 FR 34534), are estimated to reduce red grouper landings to levels specified in the red grouper rebuilding plan implemented on July 15, 2004. These bag limit provisions included: 1) Reducing the bag limit from two to one red grouper per person per day; and 2) prohibiting for-hire captain and crew from retaining bag limits of grouper while under charter.

For a complete description of the regulatory changes, please obtain a copy of the final rule from NOAA Fisheries Service at the above address. Electronic copies of the proposed rule may be obtained from the *Federal Register* Web site at <http://www.gpoaccessgov/fr/index.html>.

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